Pack camels in photos. A transforming practice in Somaliland retraced in postcards and Instagram posts

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Few artefacts, many photographs

In Somaliland, the camel is the iconic animal. It is bred and kept as economic capital, exchanged as a commodity or in social transactions, its milk and meat are highly valued, and it is exported to earn foreign currency. Moreover, strong male camels are used as beasts of burden to transport an entire household, water or goods. Pack camels (*Hayiin*, *Biyo Ma Daadshe* or *Gurgur Qaade* in Somali), however, with their loads fixed to their backs, have become a rare sight in Somaliland and its neighbouring Somali-inhabited regions. We, in cooperation with the Saryan Museum in Hargeysa, are investigating the decline in pack camel usage in the north-western Somali region in the Horn of Africa. The historical and ethnographic research project, funded by the British Museum's 'Endangered Material Knowledge Programme', seeks to document how and why some people continue working with pack camels, and to examine the causes that have prompted others to stop doing so.

The material culture of pack camels in the Somali territories is of an impermanent nature. For a

mobile pastoralist it is vital to be able to make everyday items *ad-hoc*, from scratch and en route. Since the mobile lifestyle necessitates lightweight equipment – weight slows movement – the transported belongings and tools are reduced to the essentials. Broken gear (ropes, straps, halters, etc.) decelerates as well. Hence, the kit for working with burden camels must be producible whenever necessary, in a short time, from the outset, wherever and mainly with the resources (wood, fibres, leather, etc.) available in the surrounding environment. This principle that '[…] the keeping of the skill rather than the object is essential' (Mire 2007, 60–61) is reflected in the small number of related artefacts in museum collections. As objects of daily utility, these objects were discarded when no longer in use; due to their materiality (wood, grass, leather, etc.) they decomposed; and, as undecorated everyday objects with little material or symbolic value, they were neither preserved locally nor amassed for museum collections (unlike Middle Eastern camel seats, sedans or trappings). This poses a challenge for studying historically the skilled practices and material culture involved in working with pack camels.

However, compared to the shortage of material artefacts, there is an abundance of pack camel photography. This is not surprising, since camels are the emblematic animal of the Orientalist gaze (cf. the camel-riding Arab in Said 1978). Camels and especially camel caravans have been, and still are, a popular subject of Western artistic production. Pack camels roamed – and will, probably still long after their actual 'disappearance' – continue roaming in the imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa. The musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac collections mirror this ratio between pack camel artefacts and photography. The photographs we found in these collections offer revealing glimpses into bygone times of pack camel usage in the Horn of Africa and we have selected two turn-of-the-century (19th to 20th century) picture postcards for scrutiny. To complement this, we will present two Instagram postings, as a perspective on the present. What connects the chosen colonial postcards and contemporary photos posted on Instagram, despite the many differences between the two media, is that they depict not only the practical and symbolic repurposing of pack camels, but also carry notable political messages.

Pack camels in turn-of-the-century (19th-20th) picture postcards

The transition from the 19th to the 20th century was the golden age of the picture postcard. Small, light and handy, they were an 'efficient and popular' means of mass communication, produced and sent across the world on rapidly-expanding mailing routes. The envelope-less mailing, with a picture on one side and handwritten text on the other, was a symbol of the 'advancing mobility of modernity' (Kümin and Kumschick 2001). Moreover, the heyday of postcards coincided with the climax of European colonialism and imperialism, and this is reflected in the chosen postcards depicting Somali pack camels.

Link for a better preview of the first postcard

The first postcard (**Fig.1**) shows a Somali man

Fig. 1. Picture postcard 'Somali and Camel'

standing next to a loaded, kneeling pack camel. The name of the printing company 'Howse & McGeorge, Ltd, Kenya and Uganda' (a business building of the same name still exists in Nairobi) suggests that the picture (photographer unknown) was taken in a British protectorate inhabited by Somalis (either Somaliland or British East Africa/Kenya). Despite being identified as a Somali according to his appearance (*Maro* garment, *Maas* sandals, hairstyle), we do not know who the man is. Several hints indicate that he is not a lone traveller with his pack camel. A second person seems to be holding the animal's halter, pulling the strong he-camel's neck towards the right edge of the photograph. The most telling indicator, however, is the elephant tusk loaded onto the camel, which clearly attests that the man and the pack camel are members of a hunting party.[1] Colonial safaris in Africa at that time imitated European aristocratic hunting parties. Mostly reserved for the pleasure – not subsistence – of white hunters, big game hunting was an act of domination over the colonized land and a demonstration of superiority and power (Gesine Krüger in Borgards 2016, 118). By focusing on the trophy, the photographer has captured this kind of colonial subjugation of humans, represented by the presumed Somali hunting servant and animals – domesticated (the pack camel) and wild (the killed elephant). Returning to our central inquiry, the picture narrates a story of the deployment of pack camels for diverse businesses, and of colonial appropriation of this locally available and proven mode of transport.

Fig. 2. « Djibouti – Somalis et son Chameau »

Interestingly, the second postcard (**Fig. 2**) exhibits a very similar pictorial convention and inscription. Additionally, the description contains a statement of place. Djibouti, today the name of a country and its capital, was the seat of the French colony first called *Côte française des Somalis* and then *Territoire français des Afars et des Issas*, until its independence in 1977. The postcard's 'date', as given in the musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac's online database, is 1895-1930. Whether the photograph was taken then or the postcard was produced or put on sale in this period, is not indicated. We assume that it was taken around the turn of the century, certainly not much later than the early 20th century. According to the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, the 'houses in the European quarter are built of stone, are flat-roofed and provided with verandas', while the housing of the 'natives' consisted of 'roughly made wooden houses with well thatched roofs' (1911, 414). Thus, the pack camel and its handler seem to be entering the European part of Djibouti, carrying a load of firewood, presumably for sale to the residents of the city, which had boomed due to its port and the railway to Abyssinia and had become populated with workers and businessmen from the wider region – all dependent on fuel for cooking sourced for them by locals. Furthermore, note the similar appearance of the pack camel handler and the Somali man in the picture postcard above. Same clothing, same elaborate hairstyle. Moreover, another parallel to the hunting scene is the repurposing of pack camels in a changed social and ecological environment. While pastoralists used pack camels to move towards the resources they needed – such as green pasture and water for their herds – the pack camel in this photograph is harnessed to transport needed resources to people. Since those people were probably Europeans, a postcolonial interpretation reveals that the postcard reproduces a colonial point of view. The photographic viewpoint constructs the image of a colonial subject entering the colonial urban centre serving the colonizer by supplying resources from his peripheral 'natural habitat'.

Along these lines, speculating that Howse & McGeorge Ltd's choice of the elephant hunting *sujet* to be reproduced as postcards was business-driven, the photo in Fig.1 was, presumably, selected because it evoked the imaginaries at the time, of colonial power and pride, adventure, exoticism and wild animals in Africa. It is likely that buyers of such postcards readily adorned themselves with this aura. It is also worth recalling that only a few turn-of-the-century travellers had their own cameras. Hence, the postcard's postage stamp, handwritten message and photo authenticated the sender's travels to the photographed illustrious place. On the receiving end, despite depicting only a 'fragment of another world', the image on a postcard came to represent a whole culture, country or even region of the world (Michael Oppitz in Kümin and Kumschick 2001, 4–6).

Pack camels on Instagram

In order to follow the trajectory of change in the usage of pack camels in Somaliland in the

musée du quai – Branly Jacques Chirac's collections chronologically, a continuous analysis of photographs is needed. Particularly worth mentioning are a series of detailed 1930s ethnographic photographs (e.g. Edgar Aubert de la Rüe or of Marcel Griaule's Dakar-Djibouti mission) as well as the 1960s humanitarian/independence photography (e.g. Francesca Lapiccirella's photos of women and pack camels in the Bakool region). In this blogpost, however, we skip several decades and photo collections and follow up on the turn-of-the-century (19^{th}– 20^{th}) picture postcards by presenting a similar, but contemporary medium. Instagram, like the postcards, focuses on the visual, giving only a little space and emphasis to text. Like postcards a hundred years ago, the social networking service is one of today's low-threshold means of circulating photographs and text messages. In addition, Instagram is used to share images of touristic experiences and cultural heritage, for example, and thereby carries political messages in one form or the other, just like the two postcards shown above.

Fig. 3. Instagram post (May 5th, 2020) of photos of a hut and a pack camel with its handler.

Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/B_z07AinjaE/

Popular among young urban and diaspora Somalis, Instagram is used, among other purposes, to promote the country, touristically and politically. The posting above (**Fig. 3**) by a tour operator celebrates Somaliland's pastoral culture, praising the swift process of packing up and moving to greener pastures by means of the pack camel. In fact, photos of camels are a cherished motif of Somalilanders uploading to Instagram from all walks of life. We even believe that the appeal of such content lies in its potential to help them cope with the uneasiness caused by their distancing relationship to camels and removal from a 'traditional' livelihood due to rapid social and ecological transformations, such as urbanization or climate change. In order to re-connect to the animals and a reified Somali pastoral identity and lifestyle, romantic imaginaries of traditional life in bucolic scenery are nursed through means of Instagram and other media. Hence, the 'disappearing' pack camels are rendered a touristic brand or cultural heritage, and an identity marker for a Somali population uprooted by the long years of civil war and unrest. Moreover, colonial associations, i.e. the pack camel in the colonial service, like in hunting parties or the supply of firewood, are stripped out of the picture.

The second Instagram post we selected (**Fig. 4**) puts the, at once

Fig. 4. Instagram post (May 11th, 2018) of a photo of a pack camel with its handler.

Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BioZzISlA4V/

living and patrimonialized, material culture of Somali mobile pastoralism in perspective. The text in Somali in the comments column says: ‘Camels are nomadic culture and have top priority for Somalis. It is their main means of transport’. The photo shows a camel with curved poles on top (*Udub*, *Dhigo iyo lool*) that are the supporting structure for a hut (*Buul* or *Aqal*). Below these are mats (e.g. *Raar*) and cushions (*Caws*) tightened by straps (e.g. *Ceyn*) and halters (*Xadhig* or *Hogaan*). All these elements of the pack camel’s gear are deemed ‘traditional’. Conversely, the young man holding the pack camel breaks with the image of a timeless traditional Somali pastoral lifestyle. His fashionable attire – note also how his hairstyle differs from the men on the postcards – suggests that he could be an urban youth on a weekend pleasure trip or the pack camel handler himself. Either way, the photo explicitly indicates the diffusion of urban material into the rural lifestyle, thus portraying how rural-urban relations are closely integrated. Furthermore, the account name of this Instagrammer adds an additional layer of meaning to the pack camel photo: ‘greatsoomaali’ refers to the nationalistic idea of a Greater Somalia (*Somaliweyn*), an imagined nation state that would include all Somali-inhabited territories. This vision was actively pursued by Somalia’s president Siad Barre (in office in 1969-1991) and came to a disastrous halt with long-term repercussions when its army was defeated in 1978 while trying to conquer the Somali-inhabited Ogaden region of Ethiopia. Hence, metaphorically speaking, the pack camel in this Instagram post carries the heavy burden of a failed nationalist political ambition.

Retracing the change in pack camel mobilities and symbolism

Camels used to be pivotal to the mobility of pastoralists in Somaliland. Strong camels transported entire households, water from the well to the hamlet or carried commercial goods between the seaports and the hinterlands. The collective indigenous knowledge about pack camels was highly treasured, transmitted from generation to generation and verbalized in oral lore.[2] In recent decades, however, their use has become rare. This study of pack camel photographs (and their disseminators) has revealed not only noteworthy loads and different uses of pack camels, but also how human-camel relations are changing due to social and ecological dynamics. First, the presented photos illustrate how the practical use of pack camels is subject to constant changes corresponding to the affordances of the social and natural

environment (e.g. in the colonial encounter, post-conflict economic and political developments, climate change). Secondly, the photographs exhibit the symbolism of their time projected onto pack camels: imagery of colonial conquest, of exotic Orient, or of contemporary politics and processes of heritage and identity construction.

Notes

[1] Colonial big game hunting parties in Somaliland are historically documented in swanky hunting reports. The hunters were travelling sportsmen and naturalists, but mostly from the British Army (Mohamed 2004, 536). Today, big game hunting in Somaliland is a relic of the past. Elephants or lions were hunted to extinction there decades ago.

[2] See for example the burden camel poem of the famous poet Raage Ugaas (Andrzejewski and Andrzejewski 1993, 7–8).

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MUSÉE DU QUAI BRANLY JACQUES CHIRAC

Dans le cadre de sa mission de grand département pour les arts d’Afrique, d’Amérique et d’Océanie, le musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac soutient la recherche sur les collections extra-européennes des musées de France. La rubrique « Muséo » s’inscrit dans le partenariat noué entre le musée et la revue Terrain*, qui conduit à publier, dans la revue papier et sur le blog «* Carnets de Terrain »*, des articles présentant les œuvres de ces collections.*



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